

# FOUNDATIONS

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**R**CENTLY I FACILITATED A communal apostolic discernment for a group of professionals in spiritual direction, retreats and pastoral counselling. The group consisted of men and women, lay and religious, united by Jesuit sponsorship of their works. The setting for this process was a retreat-spirituality centre outside the USA. The proposition concerned the use of communal discernment by all in the ministry group as the ordinary method for establishing and orienting future directions in the apostolate of spirituality within that Jesuit province. During the sharing of reasons for the adoption of communal apostolic discernment, one lay man said, 'In this way of communal discernment, we have a much better opportunity to experience "him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine"' (Eph 3:20). That modest expression of support for communal discernment has engaged my interest ever since.

First of all, the citation to Ephesians says well what should be the result of communal discernment. Second, it lays out the elements necessary for a sound foundation for any group contemplating the use of communal discernment. It is this second aspect of the quotation - a sound foundation for communal discernment - which is the focus of this essay.

Whether it be an individual or a communal discernment, three factors have to be considered before the process begins. These factors are the dispositions of the discerners, the context for discernment and the matter to be discerned. Ephesians 3:20 incorporates each of these factors.

## *The dispositions of the discerners*

Discernment is a religious event:

Discernment ultimately does mean placing ourselves as unreservedly as possible in God's hands, asking God to shape our lives through our decisions and thus allowing God to bring to fulfilment the creative work that God has already begun in us. For fruitful discernment, therefore, we need a God to whom we can entrust ourselves with confidence. Among the many Christian concepts of God that exist, those which portray God as a God of unfailing love, compassion and forgiveness are the ones most likely to offer this secure foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Those involved in a communal discernment should both accept this radical direction, i.e. to place themselves in God's hands, to ask God to shape their lives, and then allow God to bring to fulfilment the creative work God has begun in them. Such spiritual availability is a surrender not to passivity but to partnership, to being with God in their discovery of what to do together.

The Ignatian paradigm for such partnership with God is found in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Certainly, the *Exercises* are not the only paradigm, but they remain a sound one, which is intimately connected to discernment. In the twenty introductory remarks to the *Exercises*, the Annotations, Ignatius suggests a series of dispositions which will facilitate partnership with God and, consequently, authentic predispositions for communal discernment. Chief among these predispositions are the following:

*Freedom* to let God act in one's life and also in the lives of one's partners in the discernment process (Exx 1, 15 and 18).

*Reverence* for those times when God does act in personal and communal prayer, in discussions, clarifications and frustrations and in the recognition of movements of consolation and desolation (Exx 3).

*Generosity* as a largeness of mind and heart which will allow God to ask the discernment participants to bear kindly - if not always cheerfully - with one another's foibles and failures, to be reconciled after the inevitable challenges and disagreements which surface in any group action and, especially, to undergo the sacrifices and surprises which are part of a common enterprise (Exx 5).

*Self-critical awareness and self-revelation* which will enable the discernment participants to recognize and to distinguish between those times when God leads a group in a certain direction and when non-god leads in another direction, and then the ability to communicate these movements to one another within the discerning group (Exx 6-10, 13-15).

*A balanced detachment for the sake of the group* toward one's own treasured opinions and priorities (Exx 16).

*A willingness and practical ability* to take the time and space necessary to pray, to meet, to discuss, to work towards a proposition for discernment and then to examine its strengths and weaknesses, its lights and its shadows (Exx 19-20).

To these six predispositions, I would add a seventh *quality*, *Jaith* in God as good and giving, present in that modality to each individual

within the discerning group and to the group as a community of discerners. This trust in God as good and giving implies also trust within the group for one another, as people in whom God is working. The belief that God can work directly in oneself and the belief that God can work just as truly in others are founded in two other Ignatian introductory reflections from the *Exercises*:<sup>2</sup>

The one giving the Exercises should not urge the one receiving them toward poverty or any other promise more than toward their opposites, or to one state or manner of living more than to another. Outside the Exercises it is lawful and meritorious for us to counsel those who are probably suitable for it to choose continence, virginity, religious life, and all forms of evangelical perfection. *But during these Spiritual Exercises when a person is seeking God's will, it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future.* Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (Exx 15, italics added)

That both the giver and the maker of the Spiritual Exercises may be of greater help and benefit to each other, it should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favorably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; and if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved. (Exx 22)

To be part of a communal discerning group is, then, to accept the call to mutuality, an active partnership with God and with one another, to become a community of Christian decision-makers. To hear this call to communal discernment and to respond to this call, individuals must learn to listen to one another, to sort out the influences in what they hear and then to share with their fellow discerners what all this means for the group.

Again, the Ignatian preparation for such a process as communal discernment is not the only one available to us; however, it is one which has endured as a secure organization of those dispositions which

can assure a sound discernment. The question which follows from this is how do people of good will attain these dispositions? This brings us to the second factor in laying a foundation for communal discernment, the context.

*The context of discernment*

Communal discernment means that people try together to find God's leadership in a decision. The common action involved in this process is more than merely negotiating towards a decision, more than merely working side by side at a common project. The common action means mutuality, the willingness to help one another to develop the dispositions we have explored above and, thereby, in working at these together, to create a community-in-faith. The best way of going about the creation of this mutuality, this community-in-faith, is to undergo a series of common faith events which will progressively develop group ownership of the dispositions by seeing their need, experiencing their power and, finally, allowing these dispositions to re-form the group. By 're-form' I mean both to convert the group from the kind of wayward individualism which impedes authentic common discernment and to restructure the group so that it can move gracefully into the actual process of communal discernment.

There are three stages of mutual exchange, moving progressively from knowing one another's histories to appreciating one another's faith-journey to praying as a community about gospel priorities. Let me say something about each of these stages of mutual exchange.

*Autobiographical sharing.* By this I mean a non-threatening narration of one's history. This narrative is not meant to embarrass anyone. It is not a sensitivity session in which participants are expected to disclose their most intimate struggles and aspirations. But neither is it meant to be a detached chronology of vital statistics. Rather, avoiding both extremes, the autobiographical sharing is supposed to be an adult overview of those events which have helped to shape a man's or woman's identity, talents and loyalties. An example of some of the questions which could prompt such adult autobiographical sharing are the following:

What kind of family background did you come from? Who were some of the people who influenced your early years and why? What about your education? Where did you go to school? What academic subjects, people, peers influenced you?  
 What kind of career have you pursued? What did you wish to accomplish in life? Who have served as significant influences in your adult life?

What about those people who have helped to shape your affective life? Your spouse? friends? children?

As you have grown older, what has become increasingly important to you as a person: values? experiences? relationships?

The aim is not to ask participants in such sharing to give an exhaustive review, but rather to help people to prepare a personal reflection on who they are as they enter upon this group formation. In giving this particular process some discipline, I have found it helpful to limit each participant to a half hour, to schedule a break between every two participant reviews and to give the participants time to ask questions of clarification about one another's autobiographical narratives. I would also encourage the use of a facilitator for these sessions. Finally, these autobiographical sessions could cover a number of weeks, depending on the number of participants in the discernment and their schedules.

*Faith sharing.* The second process of forming a discerning community centres on the faith journey among the participants, even more specifically on fostering mutual understanding and reverence for how God has already shaped lives. The terms 'faith journey' and 'faith-sharing' are, admittedly, not always congenial ones because they can connote for many people artificial strategies which force them to reveal parts of their lives which are private and even sacred. Therefore, it is important to underscore two realities at the outset of this second process of forming a discerning community. First, everyone who has agreed to do the communal discernment is presumably willing to do it well. Second, no one should feel she or he has to reveal more than is appropriate.

Again, it may be helpful to exemplify the kinds of questions which can help people to organize and to articulate their faith experience.

What does God mean to you? What does it mean to you to identify yourself as a Christian? How have you developed as a Christian?

As you review your Christian life, how have your feelings, convictions and priorities changed, developed, been challenged or confirmed over the years?

What does Jesus Christ mean to you? the Holy Spirit? the Church?

What have been the patterns of consolation and desolation over the years?

What are your present expectations as you prepare to be part of a communal discernment process?

Again, I would keep the individual reflections to about a half hour for each participant, certainly no more than forty minutes. I would - again - encourage a facilitator for these sessions; And, finally, I would adapt the schedule to the number of participants and their availability.

At this point, let me spell out a caution, applicable both to the autobiographical and the faith-sharing sessions. This concerns confidentiality among the participants. It is imperative that what is said within the group remain in the group. An adult group of women and men who want to find God's lead in an important decision have to trust one another and have to honour that trust. Simply stated, this means that every participant must be assured that what has been said within the group about another's lives stays in the group.<sup>3</sup>

If conducted gently and seriously, these two preparatory sharing sessions will help the participants to know and to respect one another as people of adult faith and commitment. There will be an emerging consciousness of God already at work in people's lives, of histories which exhibit generosity and reverence in action. In the act of communication and listening, of attention and clarification, the participants begin to view one another and their group as a true communion: a gathering, blessed by God, of people who want to accomplish something good in their service of God.

*Prayer about the kingdom.*<sup>4</sup> The final preparatory process is one which centres on Christ's priorities, especially in preaching, teaching and modelling the kingdom of God. The discerning group needs time to pray together about its understanding of the mission of Christ and its role now in that mission. The passages people use will vary. Again, I strongly urge the use of a facilitator to lead these prayer reflections.

I have found Luke's Gospel particularly helpful, especially two narratives: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the cure of the woman crippled for eighteen years (Lk 13:10-17). The focus for the prayer over these passages can be something like this:

What does this gospel episode say to you about the priorities of Jesus? Is that priority something which we can also accept and work to accomplish today?

What are the hindrances to our living and practising what Jesus was and did? How can we overcome these?

As you look at these gospel narratives, how would you describe the kingdom'?

These three processes - autobiographical sharing, faith-sharing and prayer together about the kingdom preached by Christ - can stretch

over a period of months or be tailored to fit a series of weekends. They will take time and they demand commitment on the part of all those who are to undertake the communal discernment. But if they are employed generously, then the actual process of communal discernment will be a far more effective religious event. The reason for this is that it is impossible to undergo these kinds of group conversations without also confronting both the individual and corporate need to work at the predispositions essential for sound group discernment. Christian conversation is not a set of discrete pious reflections strung together by the accident of people sitting next to one another in the same room. Rather, Christian conversation is a mutual search for that truth which God working within us wishes us to discover together. By 'doing' these processes, the group becomes a community of Christian conversation, apt for shared discernment.<sup>5</sup>

There is a final observation about the context for discernment. The community in Christian conversation also has to determine what kind of corporate identity it has as it moves towards an actual discernment together. What kind of Christian community in discernment is it?<sup>6</sup>

Is it a community that has authority to govern and to set policy, e.g. the board of a school, a spirituality centre, a hospital? Is it a community that has been asked simply to advise those who, ultimately, are in charge, e.g. consultants to a religious provincial or a bishop, or the staff of a spirituality centre asked to submit a set of priorities to the board or to the director? Is it a community which gives professional help, *vis-a-vis* resources, e.g. the finance committee of a diocese, a board committee asked to submit plans to the full board of a school, a hospital, a spirituality centre? It is important that the participants who have laboured to become a Christian community in conversation know their mission, their responsibilities, authority and lines of accountability *before* they undertake the actual communal discernment.

Once a group has achieved a peaceful resolve to work together to find God's leadership within the mandate of its mission, it has one more foundational task, to name its mission, to know as concretely as possible what it is going to consider.

### *The matter of discernment*

As the group forms its identity as a faith community in conversation about communal apostolic discernment, it has to give meaning to its mission: what issues demand the time, energy and concentration of a communal discernment process? Two practical guidelines are operative in defining the issues: the inherent seriousness of the topic and the

evidence of some kind of division of opinion about what to do. Some examples of the kinds of serious issues which can elicit opposite opinions about what should be done are the following: whether to remain or to withdraw from a traditional apostolic work, whether to remain a single-sex school or to become co-educational, whether to assume an inner-city apostolate despite diminished personnel in a religious community, whether to make obligatory a distinct period of formation for future members of a lay association. Because communal discernment takes time and group commitment, the process should deal with important practical issues on which there is no clear consensus about what is the greater good.

The discerning community has at least five tasks which help to give focus to its mission. These five tasks are:

*The gathering of data.* The discerning members have to have access to information, background history and the resources to help them grasp the issues. They also need time to do this before the actual discernment.

*The ability to sift through issues.* Competing possibilities have to be lined up, seen to be ethically good options and organized.

*The explicit willingness to go beyond argument and debate to seek participation with God's leadership.* The discerning group needs to reaffirm that they are not merely seeking a prudent resolution of a problematic situation which may have divided good people nor are they striving to achieve a politically astute compromise to keep everyone happy for a while nor are they looking only for a financially successful agreement. The discerning group accepts *before* the actual process, and in the light of the data they have reviewed and in the face of sometimes conflicting opinions, that God may ask them to take a risk, to make an unpopular decision, to set out on a profoundly counter-cultural course which could alienate long-time benefactors and supporters. Therefore, the discerning group must reaffirm that criteria like compatibility with the gospel, fidelity to the Church's teaching, the authentic realization of the charism of a religious community or the clear assertion of a lay association's fundamental purpose are more important than a sound business deal or a shrewd political compromise.

*A forthright presentation of those biases, fears and personal desires* which, antecedent to the discernment process, influence the emotions and judgement of the participants. The mutuality

of the discerning community - all that the members have worked to achieve in their processes of earlier sharing - should invite a corporate awareness that the discerners will need to support and challenge one another when they begin to consider the arguments for and against the discernment proposal.

*Ongoing asceticism* is needed to keep the focus on finding how God leads the group. In the midst of a discernment process people may want to reconstruct the proposition or to redefine the terms in order to avoid the decision which has to be made. There is wisdom in the discerning group facing those future moments of group desolation and darkness which are inevitable in communal discernment.

The foundations for sound communal discernment take time to establish. For that reason many communal discernments never really get started. Foundations for sound communal discernment confront our unfreedoms. For that reason many communal discernments fail. Time and freedom - these are, finally, what will help a group work to become capable of communal discernment. I have been privileged to facilitate a number of communal discernment processes not only in the USA but in East Asia, Africa and the UK. I have worked where adaptations were necessary to accommodate schedules and lack of facilities. My experience is that if people are willing to establish the foundations for communal discernment, it happens - among rich or poor, lay or religious, as part of a juridical chapter or simply out of a desire to effect a more reflective lay association. When the foundations have been established and the process of discernment is finally under way, then indeed good women and men have experienced 'him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Lonsdale, *Listening to the music of spirit: the art of discernment* (Notre Dame, 1992), p 45. The most comprehensive theoretical treatment of discernment in English is to be found in Jules Toner SJ, *A commentary on St Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits* (St Louis, 1982) and his *Discerning God's will, Ignatius Loyola's teaching on Christian decision-making* (St Louis, 1991). Still helpful on communal discernment is Toner's 'A method for communal discernment of God's will' in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 3 (January 1971) and John Carroll Futrell, 'Communal discernment: reflections on experience' in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 4 (November 1972). On communal discernment in Lonsdale, cf pp 121-136.

<sup>2</sup> Citations to the *Exercises* and quotations from them are in the edition by George E. Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (St Louis, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> James F. Keenan SJ, 'Confidentiality: erosion and restoration' in *Review for Religious* 51 (November–December 1992), pp 882-894.

<sup>4</sup> On the importance of the kingdom in approaching the meaning of Jesus, see John P. Meier, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus* vol II, 'Mentor, message, and miracles' (New York, 1994), pp 237–506.

<sup>5</sup> J. Peter Schineller, 'Conversation in Christian life and ministry' in *Ministerial spirituality and religious life*, ed John M. Lozano (Chicago, 1986), pp 91--116.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *Who are the people of God? Early Christian models of community* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp 17-55.